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ECUMENISM

FROM PERSIA TO CHINA - AMONG MUSLIMS AND MONGOLS:
THE CHURCH OF THE EAST AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

Dr. Dietmar Winkler

EARLY SYRIAC CHRISTIAN POETRY:
ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THEOLOGY AND
ITS RELATIONSHIP TO ANTIOCHENE EXEGESIS
FROM AN ECUMENICAL POINT OF VIEW

Shijo Joseph Puthenparambil

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Editorial

“All should realize that it is of supreme importance to understand, venerate, preserve and foster exceedingly rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches, in order faithfully to preserve the fullness of Christian tradition, and to bring about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christian” (UR 15). This is the mind of the Second Vatican Council which treaded new paths in the very understanding of the nature of the Church and the relationship between the churches of different traditions.

The Apostolic Tradition of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church was formed and grew as tripartite ecclesial tradition: namely Latin West Tradition, Greek East Tradition and Syriac Orient Tradition.¹ Although the Church was born in an Aramaic linguistic and cultural milieu of Jesus and the Apostles, the Syriac Ecclesial Traditions which represent it today were not properly recognized in the Universal Church. Nevertheless the Semitic (Syriac) tradition is gradually gaining its due importance in the one Church of Christ. The ecumenical dialogues and collaborations between the churches from the beginning of 20th century paved the path to this mutual acceptance of the churches of different traditions.

For that matter every Church has an ecumenical role. A Church does not have the fundamental ecclesial character unless it is open and sensitive to the other Churches in

terms of communion. Hence no church can live in an isolated manner. The unity among the churches is fostered by collaboration and cooperation between the churches. Unity of the Church is not uniformity of the Church. It is also not absorbing of one Church into another. Unity of the Church is the bond of mutual communion, recognizing mutually the distinctive character of the Liturgy, Theology, Spirituality and Discipline of each Church, and at the same time maintaining unity in faith, sacraments and apostolic ministry.

In this issue of *Christian Orient* we bring our attention to the field of the study of Syriac Christianity. Especially we bring to light the contributions made by the Church of the East to the Greek tradition specially the syriac poetry to the growth of Theology and Exegesis. The relation between the Syriac and Greek traditions in the background of the School of Antioch is also delineated in this context. So we present two main articles from two eminent scholars in the field of ecumenism and Patristic studies. I am happy to present the findings of these two fervent Research Scholars of the University of Salzburg of Austria. Asserting the fact that the Church of the East is not just a “Nestorian” episode in the history of early Christianity within the Roman Empire Prof. Dr. Dietmar Winkler gives a bit long study on the theme: “From Persia To China - Among Muslims And Mongols: The Church

¹ Cf. SEBASTIAN BROCK, “The Syriac Orient: a third ‘lung’ for the Church?”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 71 (2005) 5-20.

Of The East And Its Environment". Being a 'Church on fire' regarding its missionary zeal the Church of the East or the East Syriac Christianity gained a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula and reached the Chinese imperial court of the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century. Today, there are four main denominations being the heirs of the "Church of the East" and its missionary activities and this Church has a long history of interreligious encounter and acculturation. Prof. Dr. Dietmar W. Winkler is Dean of the School of Catholic Theology at the University of Salzburg, Austria. He is also Professor of Patristic Studies and History of Christianity and director of the Center for the Study of the Christian East. Since 2008, he has been Consultant of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Vatican). Prof. Winkler, who serves on the Salzburg Institute Advisory Board, is a member of the board of Pro Oriente (Vienna) and responsible theologian for the dialogue with the oriental churches and the academic director of "Pro Oriente Studies in the Syriac Tradition." Prof Winkler has written edited and co-edited 13 books and numerous journal articles and book chapters.

The second article is a study on "Early Syriac Christian Poetry: Its Contribution to Theology and its Relationship to Antiochene Exegesis from an Ecumenical Point of View". Early Syriac Christian writers made use of poetry to produce and to popularize theological views based on the Holy Scripture and the Tradition. This paper studies the originality and uniqueness of Early Syriac poetical exegesis and its specific role in constituting a common tradition that makes use of poetry to teach, to preach and to praise

and which is well recognizable not only in among different Churches of Syriac tradition but also other linguistic traditions of Christianity. Finally this paper aims at briefly analysing the relationship between Syriac Christian Poetry and Antiochene exegesis.

Fr. Shijo Joseph is now research scholar at the faculty of patristic theology, Paris Lodron University, in Salzburg, Austria. He was an attendant at *Third PRO ORIENTE Colloquium Syriacum* in 2011. He participated in the 8th Deutscher Syrologentag, 14./15. März 2014, at Bildungshaus St. Virgil, Salzburg, Austria and presented a paper on "Askese und Gelehrsamkeit: Das Monastische Leben des Narsai von Nisibis, Ein Ostsyrisches Beispiel" which was later published in: *Beiträge des 8. Deutschen Syrologie-Symposiums* (Orientalia – Patristica – Oecumenica Vol. 10), Münster 2016. He presented a paper on "Some Observations on Narsai's Homily 44", at 8th World Syriac Conference 8–16, Sept., 2014, SEERI, Kottayam. His doctoral work includes an edition of the Syriac text of Narsai of Nisibis' 44th homily, *On the Renewal of the Creation* and an English translation of the same. At present continuing his research at the university of Salzburg as well as working as assistant parish priest in the archdiocese of Salzburg Austria.

Let me conclude with the words of Pope Leo XIII: "The Churches of the East are worthy of the glory and reverence that they hold throughout the whole of Christendom in virtue of those extremely ancient, singular memorials that they have bequeathed to us" (*Orientalium Dignitatis*)

Dr. Cherian (Joby) Karukaparambil
Section Editor

FROM PERSIA TO CHINA - AMONG MUSLIMS AND MONGOLS:

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

Dietmar W. Winkler

Dr. Dietmar Winkler

The Church of the East is not just a "Nestorian" episode in the history of early Christianity within the Roman Empire. This Church has a long history of interreligious encounter and acculturation of which we will give some examples in this paper. Today, there are four main denominations being the heirs of the "Church of the East" and its missionary activities. Although there are no accurate statistics, the following numbers may give at least an idea of their size and spreading at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The "Assyrian Church of the East" has approximately 385,000 members. The "Ancient Church of the East" numbers perhaps 50-70,000 faithful, in total. The "Chaldean Catholic Church", with about 400,000 members, which is in communion with the Roman Catholic Church and in line with the original patriarchal succession. And, last but not least, the Indian Catholics who follow the East Syriac rite, the "Syro-Malabar Church", who are by far the largest group. They have about 3, 8 Million members.

Historical research on Christianity commonly focuses on the areas within the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean and

Europe, where Christianity eventually became the religion of the majority. There is awareness that already in the first two centuries, Christianity spread with remarkable rapidity in Syria, Egypt and north-westwards into Asia Minor, Cappadocia and Greece, Italy and Spain, that growing Christian communities could be found in Gaul and Britain as well as in Roman Africa with Carthage as its centre. However, little consideration has been shown on the fact that also the Roman imperial frontier and language barrier in the northeast had been crossed.

By the first century there were already Christian communities in Mesopotamia, which was part of the Persian empire of the Parthians, superseded by the Sassanians in the third century. As early as the fifth century this "Persian Church" had crossed the Oxus, and Sogdians and Turks, as well as the South Indian Malabar coast, had been reached. East Syriac Christianity gained a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula and reached the Chinese imperial court of the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century. From the perspective of Christianity in the Roman Empire of the late antique world, Christianity in Persia was seen

as belonging to the church of the "East". From the Persian perspective Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem are considered "West". The Persian Church never was part of the Roman Imperial Church and of the ecclesial politics of the emperors of the Roman Empire. The "Church of the East" the greatest geographical scope of any Christian church until the Middle Ages.¹ It always regarded itself as part of Syriac Christianity, but the permanent wars between the Roman and the Persian empires had cut the Aramean world into two. And it was on the eastern side of the political demarcation that Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the Persian Sassanian Empire, was to become the patriarchate of East-Syriac Christianity.

1. The "Loss" of the Orient

Although the Gospel has its origin in a Syro-Aramaic setting, and there has been continually throughout history a Christian Aramaic tradition — which we encounter in the various Syriac Churches — this has moved to the background and has been largely forgotten in theological discourse. In many cases the discussion addresses only the "Latin West" (including the churches of the Reformation and the Anglicans) and the "Greek East" (including Slavic Orthodoxy), while the third important tradition, the "Orient" with its Syriac, Coptic, Armenian,

and Ethiopian traditions receives no consideration."² Knowledge of this branch of Christendom is slight, although Oriental Christianity constitutes its third strand alongside the Latin-Western and Greek-Byzantine traditions.

A first reason, why Church History and Theology has been looking mainly towards the west, is the *Ecclesial History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (+339) whose perspective became the model for nearly every subsequent foray into church history until the twentieth century. Eusebius — and before him already Luke in his Acts — concentrated on an account of Christianity in the Roman Empire, which led him to pay heightened attention to Europe. This "Eurocentrism" (and later on "Americacentrism") overlooked the fact that a large part of Christianity took hold outside of the Roman Empire and spread across all of Asia and parts of Africa.

The main reason to expel Oriental Christianity from our books of Church History is, however the Christological discussion of the 5th. century within the Roman Empire. On the basis of the fifth-century controversies over Christology, those churches which accepted the definition of faith established by the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) judged Oriental Christianity either as "Monophysite" or

¹ Cf. D.W. Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum. Untersuchungen zu Christologie, Ekklesiologie und zu den ökumenischen Beziehungen der Assyrischen Kirche des Ostens* (Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 26). Münster 2004, 17-80; idem., "The Age of the Sassanians: until 651", in: W. Baum/D.W. Winkler, *The Church of the East. A concise history*. London 2003, 7-41.

² Cf. S. Brock, "Relevance of Syriac Studies", in: *The Harp* 1 (1988) No. 2/3, 10-12; idem., "The Importance and Potential of SEERI in an International Context", in: *The Harp* 10 (1997) No. 1/2, 45-50.

“Nestorian”, as schismatic at best but in most instances as heretical. Both is theologically not accurate.³

Within western academic theology the Oriental tradition continued to be disregarded, on the one hand because the decisions of the Imperial Councils led to a concentration on the Latin West and Greek East and on the other hand because Oriental languages such as Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian and Armenian were studied more often in academic programs at institutes of Oriental Studies and Philology than in theological schools. Although most of that literature is comprised of religious texts, yet the study of Oriental Christianity was almost totally ignored by the other Christian traditions. Both, the so-called Nestorian and the so-called Monophysite Churches, are often “straw men” in western Systematic Theology and Church History knocked down early in a chapter on Christology. But they are still alive and preserving a rich heritage of theology, history, and spirituality.

2. The beginning of the East Syriac Church or “Church of the East”

Up to now the Church of the East has been called the “Nestorian Church”. Encyclopedia information is generally under this entry. From a theological point of view

this term must be rejected today, because “Nestorian” refers to a heresy which is regarded to separate the humanity and divinity in the Jesus Christ. This does not reflect the Christological teachings of this Church. Moreover, it is a heresy the Church of the East itself has rejected as incorrect since at least the 6th century.⁴ In 1298, the distinguished East Syrian author and canonist Abdisho bar Brika (+1318) wrote in his book *Marganiitha* (The Pearl) that East Syrian Christians of the Church of the East “never changed their faith and preserved it as they had received it from the apostles, and they are called Nestorians unjustly, especially since Nestorius was not their Patriarch, and they did not understand his language”⁵.

Somewhat better therefore is the expression pre-Ephesian Church, because the Church of the East accepts only the first two imperial synods, the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381), as ecumenical. But this part of Christianity expanded outside the bounds of the Roman Empire. Therefore, the term East Syriac or Syro-Oriental Church is more appropriate than a name which refers to the reception of Councils of the Roman Empire. Better yet, is to name them, how they have been called according to their synodical records in the 5th and 6th centuries, i.e. the (Apostolic) “Church of the East”, whose

³ Cf. D.W. Winkler, “Miaphysitism. A new Term for Use in the History of Dogma and in Ecumenical Theology-”, in: *The Harp* 10 (1997) No. 1/2, 33-4; Idem, “Monophysitism”, in: G. W. Bowersock/P. Brown/O. Grabar (Eds.), *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Cambridge/MA 1999, 586-588.

⁴ Cf. Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum* 42-80; Idem, „Nestorius (um 381-451/453)”, in: G.M. Hoff/U.H.J. Körtner (eds.), *Arbeitsbuch Theologiegeschichte. Diskurse-Alaure-Wissensformen*. Vol. 1: 2.-15. Stuttgart 2012, 148-165.

⁵ Abdisho bar Brika, *Marganiitha* 111.4. Quote from G.P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their Rituals Vol II*. London 1852 (reprint 1987), 400.

patriarch (catholicos) had his See to the east of the Roman Empire at the Persian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon. While Christianity in the Roman Empire was subjected to persecutions prior to 313 (Edict of Milan), it could for a time develop in peace on the other side of the Euphrates in the Persian kingdom of the Parthians (until 224).⁶ Presumably Christianity found its way into the regions east of the Tigris — Adiabene and Khuzistan — as early as the second half of the first century and beginning of the second century.⁷ However the historical sources are scanty. In contrast, at the end of the second century/beginning of the early third century, Christianity can be well explored in both literary and archaeological sources in Parthia, Kushan, Persia, Media, Edessa, Hatra, and Fars, among other places. On the island of Kharg, third-century Christian graves testify with Syriac inscriptions from Christian communities around the Persian Gulf.⁸ One can assume that Christianity spread from Osrhoene and its capital Edessa (Urfa) and from the region surrounding Nisibis (Nusaybin) into the Parthian Empire.⁹ The chronicle of Edessa offers a series of dates from the earliest history of Christianity in that

city.¹⁰ This source allows us to conclude that Christianity gained a foothold in Osrhoene in the second century.¹¹ Very probably, the first to bring Christianity to the East were those who travelled the trade routes from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and across Central Asia to China.¹² As Edessa occupied a position where significant trade routes intersected, and Antioch on the Mediterranean was the most influential metropolis of the Roman province of Syria, the Gospel travelled a route from Jerusalem through Antioch and Edessa to Mesopotamia. Edessa's significance for Syriac Christianity extends finally to the fact that the Aramaic dialect of this city (i.e. "Syriac") became the definitive biblical and liturgical language of this important branch of Christianity.

An additional factor contributing to the development of Christianity in Persia was the expanding movement of refugees. Wartime deportations are reported up to the sixth century. With the strengthening of the Persian Empire under the Sassanians (224), a state of perpetual conflict arose between the Persians and the Roman Empire. This situation had

⁶ Cf. M.-L. Chaumont, *Christianisme de l'Empire Iranien des origines aux grandes persecutions du IV^e siecle*. Louvain 1988 (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 499, Subs. 80) 1-53; W. Hage, 'The Roman Church of Constantine the Great and Christianity in the Persian Empire'. in: Idem., *Syriac Christianity in the East*. Kottayam 1988 (Moran 'Eth'o 1) 3f.

⁷ Cf. W. Schwaigert, *Das Christentum in Huzistan im Rahmen der frühen Kirchengeschichte Persiens bis zur Synode von Seleukia-Ktesiphon im Jahre 410*. Marburg 1989.

⁸ Cf. Bardesanes, *Liber Legum Regionum*. Ed. F. Nau. Paris 1907 (Patrologia Orientalis 2) 46, 606-609; M.-L. Chaumont, "Les Sassanides", in: *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 165 (1964) 179.

⁹ Cf. Chaumont, *Christianisme de l'Empire Iranien* 4-6.

¹⁰ H. Drijvers, "Edessa", in: *Theologische Realenzyklopadie* 9 (1982) 281-284.

¹¹ Cf. S. Gero, "Kirche des Ostens. Zum Christentum in Persien in der Spätantike", in: *Ostkirchliche Studien* 30 (1981) 22-27.

¹² Cf. Schwaigert, *Das Christentum in Huzistan* 101.

consequences for the spread of the Gospel above all during the reign of Shapur I (240-272). Shapur I and his army advanced far into Roman territory and finally reached Antioch in 260. Many Christians from Antioch, Cappadocia, Cilicia, and Syria were deported to Persian provinces and established as tradesmen and artisans in Babylonia, Persia, Parthia, and Susiana.¹³ Among them was Bishop Demetrius of Antioch, who subsequently served as the first bishop of Beth Lapat (Gundeshapur).¹⁴

Persian martyrologies provide further clues to the Persian ecclesiastical structure of the time.¹⁵ While in the times of the Parthians, because of their liberal religious policies, Persia was a refuge for Christians persecuted by the Roman Empire in its outlying provinces, Christians at times also endured various forms of repression under the succeeding Sassanians and the dominance of Zoroastrian religion. Violent persecution tormented Christians most notably between 339 and 379 under Shapur II (309-379).¹⁶ Causes of the persecution included not only the increasing strength of the Zoroastrian religion but also the political circumstances. The Roman ruler Constantine considered himself a Christian emperor and true lord of the Church. In a 337 letter preserved

by Eusebius, he wrote to Shapur II that the Christians ought to be protected.¹⁷ The undiplomatic letter of Constantine, who as earthly leader of the Church considered all Christians his subjects, could attract little sympathy in Persia. Moreover, the Roman-Persian conflict also involved Armenia, which had been a Christian state since 301. Thus the Sassanian rulers of the time, recognizing that Christianity in the Roman Empire was on its way to becoming the state religion, saw the Christians of Persia as a threat to their interests.

The major developments of the Church of the Roman Empire since the Edict of Milan, such as the Arian controversy at the Council of Nicea (325), had no impact whatsoever on the Persian Church. On the contrary, while under the Parthians the attitude toward the Christians was tolerant, and under the first Sasanians there were only isolated, localized persecutions for apostasy from Zoroastrianism, the reign of Shapur II brought, in response to developments in the Roman Empire, the first systematic persecutions of the region's Christians.

This is the reverse side of the coin of the history of Christianity: While the politics of Constantine had the well-known positive impact for Christians in the Roman Empire, it led to persecution of Christians in Persia

¹³ Cf. Chaumont. *Christianisme de l'Empire Iranien* 59f.

¹⁴ Cf. M.-L. Chaumont, "L'inscription de Katir a la `Kalbah de Zoroastre' (Texte, Traduction, Commentaire)", in: *Journal Asiatique* 248 (1960) 339-380.

¹⁵ Cf. *Persische Martyrerakten*. Ed. O. Braun. Kempten, Munchen 1915 (Bibliothek der Kirchenvater 22).

¹⁶ These events are reflected in the Syriac writings of a contemporary witness, the theologian Aphrahat (t. 350), called the "Persian Sage". Cf. for example Aphrahat, *Demonstratio* 5 and *Demonstratio* 21, Paris 1894 (*Pazologia Syriaca* 1) and Paris 1907 (*Patrologia Syriaca* 2).

¹⁷ Cf. Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* IV, 9-13.

in the context of the Persian-Roman clash. These persecutions, as well as the destruction of churches in the fourth century, are described in detail in the Persian martyrologies, which most likely were collected in the first decades of the 5th century. Even if the martyrologies include legendary characteristics and tend toward exaggeration, they nonetheless offer sufficient material to grasp the scale of the persecutions. As a consequence of the deaths of Shapur II (379) and his successor Ardeshir II (t 383), the situation of the Christians improved, toward the end of the fourth century. Above all king Yazdgird I (399-421) sought to ease political tensions with the Roman Empire and began to integrate Christians into imperial politics. Thus began the period of diplomatic exchanges between the two great empires of late antiquity, exchanges in which the Christian hierarchy of Persia played an essential role.¹⁸ Several Persian diplomatic missions to the neighboring Christian empire were led by bishops of the Church of the East. Likewise the Roman Empire was represented by delegates at Persian courts.

It was at that time, that the Church of the East could start its "synodical period". With the first Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410), the Persian Church got not only reorganized after the persecutions, but also brought into harmony with the faith of the West by the reception of the faith of Nicea (325). Like the councils of the Roman

Empire, the first synod of the whole Church of the East was called and supported by the state authorities. With further synods in the 5th century the Persian Church established its ecclesial and theological independence. However, contact with the Roman Imperial Church was in no way broken off. In the 6th century the ecclesial organization and the primacy of the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was perfectly established. The Church developed a strong Antiochene Christology and flourished spiritually and with its rich scholarly activities centered on the famous School of Nisibis.

3. Among Muslims: Early encounter with Islam

In the first century of their empire, the Arabs had turned the political map of the Middle East inside out. The province boundaries of the Eastern Roman empire largely disappeared as well as the frontier between the old rivals Persia and Byzantium. The Middle East in the 7th and 8th centuries became not only at once a vast common market¹⁹, but also were the various Christian denominations - Orthodox (Melkite), Syrian Orthodox, Coptic and Church of the East communities - under the same rule, without any privileges.

The fact that within a century of the death of Muhammad (632) Islam had spread across much of the known world was for many Christians inexplicable, frightening, and

¹⁸ Cf. L. Sako, *Le rôle de la hiérarchie syriaque orientale dans les rapports diplomatiques entre la Perse et Byzance aux Ve-VIe siècles*. Paris 1986.

¹⁹ Cf. D.C. Dennett, *Conversion and Poll-Tax in Early Islam*. Cambridge/MA 1950. Kennedy, "Islam" 223f

theologically incomprehensible. Muslims, on their part, on the basis of the Quranic revelations, found it impossible to understand why Christians insisted on impugning the oneness of God by their affirmation of the divinity of Jesus and the use of Trinitarian formulas.²⁰

The different Christian denominations had diverging perspectives about the conquest.²¹ Christian responses to Islam were far from monolithic: Various strategies were employed by different authors at different times. Although the life within the Orthodox (Melkite/Imperial) Church was only little disrupted during the conquest, the life after the conquest was not the same. The Patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem were cut off Constantinople and the Imperial Byzantine Church. It now stood equal to the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Copts and Syrians, so-called "Monophysites") and the Church of the East (so-called "Nestorians") as religious minorities in an Islamic land. The Orthodox (Melkites) were disconnected from their compatriots in Constantinople and now at the same level as

those Christian Churches who were seen as heretics within the Roman Empire.²² The Syriac Churches as well as the Copts in Egypt appear to have looked upon the Muslim conquests with a guarded hope of increased freedom. The bonds and duties of the Christian empire of Byzantium were no longer of importance. And it was in the early Umayyad period that the Church of the East could build monasteries in Palestine: "Tell Masos [Palestine] was founded sometimes before 700, and the Monastery of the Mount of Olives is first attested in 739."²³

However, in time, the "liberated" find that they have not been liberated very much, whereas those who have lost power find that they have not lost so much as they thought. Once the Arabs had established their power, they immediately imposed land and head taxes upon all non-Muslim inhabitants, while the Muslims themselves had a lighter set of taxes.²⁴ In the last half of the Umayyad dynasty - especially beginning with caliph al-Malik (685-705) - Christians were dismissed from administrative posts, destruction of images was taking place in the Churches of

²⁰ Cf. J.V. Tolan, *Saracens. Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*. New York 2002, esp. 40-67.

²¹ Cf. S.H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque. Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. 4th ed. Princeton 2010. D.W. Winkler, "Christian Responses to Islam in the Umayyad Period", in: D.W. Winkler (ed.), *Syriac Churches encountering Islam. Past experiences and future perspectives* (Pro Oriente Studies in Syriac Tradition 1). Piscataway: Gorgias 2010, 66-84.

²² Cf. H. Kennedy, *The Melkite Church from the Islamic Conquest to the Crusads: Continuity and Adaptation in the Byzantine Legacy* 325-343. E. Honigsmann, *Le couvent de Barsauma et le Patriarcat Jacobite d'Antioche et de Syrie*. Louvain 1954 (CSCO 146 Subs. 7).

²³ Cf. J.C. Lamoreaux, "Early Eastern Christian Responses to Islam", in: J.V. Tolan (ed.), *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam. A book of Essays*. New York-London 1996, 7; D.C. Baramki-S.H. Stephan, "A Nestorian Hermitage between Jericho and the Jordan", in: *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* 4 (1935) 81-86; V. Fritz-A. Kempinski, *Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen auf der Hit-bet el-Msas (tel Masos)*. Wiesbaden 1972-1975.

²⁴ Cf. Dennett, *Conversion and Poll-Tax in Early Islam*.

Syro-Palestine²⁵, and, as the West Syriac Scholar Bar Hebraeus reports, a decade later, in the reign of eUmar II, Christians were forbidden to ring their bells, pray loudly and to use saddles when riding.²⁶ The effect of all these actions was that at the end of the Umayyad period (750) Christians were using only half of the Churches that they had used in 600.²⁷

Christian reactions were not only diverse because of the Christian divisions, and the different social and political realities, but also somewhat ignorant. Christian authors had unfavourable stereotypes of Arabs. The invaders were seen as a scourge of God or as (punishment for sins, but not as a theological challenge. On the one hand, the Orthodox (Melkites) ascribed the success of the Muslims to sins of the heretics ("Monophysites", "Nestorians"), and on the other hand, as the ninth-century (West) Syriac chronicler Dionysius of Tel-Mahre shows, the scourge is seen as sent against the Byzantine church as punishment for its (chalcedonian dyophysite) heresy and for its persecution of the Syrian Orthodox.²⁸ Islam as a religion was not taken seriously. Early Christian commentators have little to say about Islam and its prophet. Only when it became clear that the new Muslim rulers were here to stay, affirmed their power, build Mosques etc. Christians started to react theologically.

While Syriac, Greek and Coptic Christians still would use their languages, nevertheless toward the end of the eighth century, Christian thinkers began to compose works of theology and of Christian edification in Arabic. The reason for abandoning the ancient languages and using the language of the conqueror was the new socio-economic environment and that the Christians challenged in their faith, needed Arabic in the defence of their religion and in affirming the faith of wavering believers. It was inevitable that Christians within the dar al-Islam (whether they were Syriac, Coptic or Greek speaking) would themselves learn Arabic, teach them to their children, the better to prosper within the New Islamic World Order; Arabic had become a Christian language and a most exciting body of Christian Arabic Literature started to get created. While Coptic was not widely used after the 10th century, Syriac maintained an important position as a liturgical and literary language until the fourteenth century. The Arab conquest did not interrupt the creation of Syriac literature. However, Christian academics started to write Arabic treatises and apologies on the Trinity, on Christology and other topics of faith, which were accessible to Christians and Muslims alike. These texts did not only encourage interreligious

²⁵ Cf. Ibid.

²⁶ Cf. Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronicle of Gregory Abill Faraj*. Vol. 1. Ed. E.A.W. Budge. London 1932; Reprint Piscataway 2003, 109.

²⁷ Cf. Schick, "The Fate of the Christians in Palestine during the Byzantine/Umayyad Transition, 600-750 a.d.- 107; Lamoreaux, "Early Eastern Christian Responses to Islam" 9.

²⁸ Cf. Tolan, Saracens 40; S. Brock, "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam" in: G.H.A. Juynboll, (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*. Carbondale-Edwardsville 1982, 10f.

dialogue, but also draw the lines of disagreement more clearly.

4. The translation movement in Baghdad

Between 750 and 850 A.D. the Arab world was the scene of one of the most spectacular and momentous movements in the history of thought. The movement was marked by translations into Arabic from Persian, Greek, and Syriac.²⁹ Almost all secular Greek books that were available throughout the Eastern Roman and the Persian Empires were translated into Arabic. i.e. astrology, astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, alchemy, theory of music, the entire corpus of Aristotelian philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, zoology, botany, logic, medicine, pharmacology, veterinary science, military science (tactica), wisdom sayings etc. passed through the hands of translators. Just to imagine the extent of the effort: The edition of Galen's complete medical works, which forms only a small part of the whole translation movement, comprise seventy four large volumes.³⁰

In the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Muslims, who had not brought with them art, science, and philosophy, fell heir to Hellenistic and Persian science, which were

unquestionably the most precious intellectual treasure at hand. In a few decades after the foundation of Baghdad (762 A.D.) the Arabic-reading public found at its disposal the major philosophical works of Aristotle and the Neo-Platonic commentators, the chief medical writings of Hippocrates and Galen, the main mathematical compositions of Euclid and the geographical masterpiece of Ptolemy — How could that happen?

The Abbasid revolution was a turning point in Muslim history, not only by shifting the capital from Damascus to Mesopotamia. A few miles up the Tigris River from the ruins of the Sassanian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the early Abbasids build the new capital and centre of Islamic power: Baghdad. Caliph al-Mansur chose the place in 762, where the Euphrates and Tigris come close together and where the Muslim empire could link trade routes between Europe and Asia. While the Umayyads had seen themselves as superior men, the Abbasids included more people and started a more egalitarian form of government. Hundreds of Persians and Christians rose to high positions within the army and civil administration. Muslim life was placed now in the centre of the old Sassanian Empire; in an area where Persian and Aramaic/Syriac culture remained strong.

²⁹ Cf. S.H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* 106-128; De Lacy O'Leary, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*. Chicago 1951. E.-I. Yousif, *Les philosophes et traducteurs syriaques: d'Athenes a Bagdad*. Paris 1997. H. Hugonnard-Roche, „Contributions syriaques aux etudes arabes de logique a l'epoque Abbaside", in: *Aram* 3 (1991) 193-210; R. Hoyland, „Arabic, Syriac and Greek historiography in the first Abbasid century: an inquiry to inter-cultural traffic", in: *Aram* 3 (1991) 111-234.

³⁰ Cf. S. Brock-D. Taylor, *The Hidden Pearl. Vol. II: The Heirs of the Ancient Aramaic Heritage*. Rome 2001, 128-136.

Strong elements of Sassanian culture ranging from the religious to the secular survived among these peoples and their elite occupied prominent positions in Abbasid administration.

Dimitri Gutas argues that the Abbasids used this Sassanian culture to consolidate their power.³¹ The translation of texts and by that of knowledge, into Arabic was part of the process, to form an imperial ideology since translations had to support the political and religious ideas of the caliphs. The political message is that the caliph and Islam are the true heirs to ancient Greece and all the human sciences. Intellectual centres were built, i.e. several schools, astronomical observatories in Baghdad and Damascus, an immense library in Baghdad, facilities for the translation of scientific and philosophical works from Persian, Greek and Syriac into Arabic. The Arab conquest had brought together people of diverse religions, cultures and languages. The result was a flowering of artistic and intellectual creativity.

Christians were excellent in polemical and apologetical literature since its beginnings. Their religion was acculturated in the Greco-Roman world and had taken over their literary and philosophical education and tools. Therefore Christians were very much trained in dispute and discussion. Since Christianity had begun, it had to be in constant discussion: at first with Jews, then with pagan philosophy and last but not least with fellow Christians,

especially in the Christological disputes since the 5th century.

Dialogue was a widely used literary form among Christians in the seventh century. When they started dialogue for polemic and apologetic purposes with the Muslims, they had a long pre-existing tradition as their background. Caliph al-Mandi realized that Christians and Jews were formidable intellectual opponents with century long experience. To face the intellectual problem of debate, a handbook in Arabic that teaches the art of argumentation and disputations was clearly needed. Caliph Al-Mandi commissioned the translation of Aristotle's *Topics*. The work was done around 782 by Patriarch Timothy I with the help of the Christian secretary of the governor of Mosul, Abu-Nuh.³² Later on this translation was made more and more perfect. The *Topics* teach dialectic, the art of argumentation, on a systematic basis and lists about three hundred test cases that provide approaches to arguments or their topics (*topoi*). The *Topics* were relevant for the Abbasids in interfaith dialogue, but also in Muslim-Muslim dialogue. Excellence in disputation was politically significant. Eventually the dispute became the practice par excellence in Muslim legal studies and methodology.

Syriac speaking Christians contributed more than any other people to this general cultural awakening and intellectual renaissance in Abbasid Baghdad. For at least two centuries

³¹ Cf. D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society*. London-New York 1998.

³² H. Suermann, "Timothy and his Dialogue with Muslims", in: *The Harp* 8/9 (1995/96) 263-275.

before the appearance of Islam, Syriac scholars had already been translating Greek works into Syriac. While Arabians did not know Greek thought, Syriac Christians had been in contact with the Greek world for over a millennium. They provided the continuity of scholarship in the fields of medicine and philosophy during the period between the end of the Byzantine and Persian rule and the time of the Abbasids.

Christian translators tended to know at least three languages: Syriac, Greek and Arabic. Because it was easier to translate from one Semitic language into another, many Christian translators worked in two stages: First translating from Greek into Syriac and then from Syriac into Arabic. However, not all translators were Christian. There were also Jews and Persians. As time went on, Muslim scholars also became proficient in the work of translation, working directly from Greek. For a period during the ninth century, amidst the intellectual excitement, Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars all collaborated in the massive undertaking.

This translation movement was to prove immensely important for subsequent intellectual and cultural history, not only in the Islamic world, but also in Western Europe. Greek works translated into Arabic entered the Western world through Spain (and Sicily) even before the Greek originals were known in Europe. The translation movement with its main contributors (scholars) from the Church of the East whether cleric or lay -

did not only gave birth to and shape Classical Islamic Civilization, intellectual life and society, but also influenced European philosophy, theology and culture of the Middle Ages. The Greek heritage was now available in Arabic and then translated from Arabic into Latin, thanks to famous Muslim scholars Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and others in 12th century Spain.

However, Muslim unity became more and more a fiction. During the late ninth and tenth centuries, various Muslim dynasties took control of the various parts of the Muslim Empire. The power of the Abbasid caliphs ebbed away, although the dynasty was alive in Baghdad until 1258, when the Mongols took over.

5. Among Mongols: Missionary Enterprise in Central Asia and China

Already in the 7th century, while the Arabs conquered the Middle East, East Syriac missionaries reached the court of the Emperor of China, and in the European Middle Ages the Church of the East was geographically far larger than the Roman Catholic Church. At times of Ishoyahb II (628-646), who was the last Catholicos-Patriarch under the Sassanians and the first of the era of the Arabs, the expansion of East Syriac Christianity reached China. As the 781 stele of Xian (Changan, Singan-fu), the capital of China under the Tang Dynasty, recorded, a group of missionaries sent by Ishoyahb II reached China in 635.³³ Additional

³³ Cf. among others: L. Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and its Literature in Chinese together with a new English translation of the Dunhuang Nestorian documents*. Frankfurt/Main 2002; W. Han, "Missionary Enterprise of the Church of the East in Central and East Asia", in: Idem., *Syriac Christianity in the East*, 14-26

metropolitanates were subsequently founded by Ishoyahb II at Hulwan (Iran), Herat (Afghanistan), Samarkand (Uzbekistan), China (with Sees at Xian and Lo-yang), and eventually also in India, whose Christians had already been mentioned by Cosmas Indicopleustes and which had been under the influence of the Church of the East since at least the end of the third century.

At the time of the prominent East Syriac Catholicos-Patriarch Timothy I (780-832) a significant well organized missionary enterprise towards the East took place. He might also serve as a symbol of the Church of the East's encounter with Asian as well as Arabic culture and religion. Famous is the so-called dispute between Timothy I and caliph al-Mandi (775-785).³⁴ The caliph had permitted Timothy to move his See to Baghdad, an honour permitted to the East Syriac Christians alone. Patriarch Timothy was in friendship with the caliph and his son Haran ar-Ragd and had every once in a while talks with them on philosophy and theology. The dispute probably took place in 782/83 for two days, when the caliph raises the standard objections to Christian doctrines and practices the Patriarch provides suitable replies to Christology, Trinity, Liturgy, and Scriptures. The text, originally written in Syriac and soon translated into Arabic, was very popular and in wide circulation.

But under this energetic Catholicos-Patriarch and promoter of missionary activities Christianity also spread along the Silk Roads together with Aramaic culture and liturgy and reached peoples of Persia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Mongolia, China, Tibet, and India. For the first time in the history of Syrian mission there is evidence about monks and bishops who were specifically equipped for their missionary work and sent out. They obviously followed the trade routes of Persian and Iranian merchants towards Central Asia and China and one may suppose that the staging posts of those Christian merchants in cities like Merv, Bukhara and Samargand or like the Turfan oasis grew into the first missionary bases among the native peoples.

In 1928 Edgar Wallis Budge (1857-1934) published an English translation of a Syriac narrative that goes back to the 14th century and called the book "The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China".³⁵ This most fascinating text, originally written in Persian, gives us an impression of the impressive expansion of the Church of the East, the most successful missionary church in the Middle Ages. It recounts the travels of two Turkic-speaking (whether Uighur or Ongut) Christian monks from China in the 13th century. Bar Sauma from Cambalic (today's Beijing) and Markos from Kawshang

³⁴ Cf. *Timotheos I., ostsyrischer Patriarch: Disputation mit dem Kalifen Al-Mahdi*. Einleitung, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen von M. Heimgartner (CSCO 632) Louvain 2011; H. Suermann, "Der nestorianische Patriarch Timotheos I. und seine theologischen Briefe im Kontext des Islam", in: M. Tamcke/A. Heinz (ed.), *Zu Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Gegenwartsfrage der syrischen Kirchen* (Studien zur orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 9). Hamburg 2000, 217-230.

³⁵ Cf. *The Monks of Kuhlai Khan, Emperor of China*. Trans. E. A. Wallis Budge. London 1928.

set out for Jerusalem in order to pray at the tomb of the Lord. They travelled along the Silk Roads through China and Central Asia and reached Kurdistan and today's Iraq, where the See of their Patriarch was. They were unable to proceed further west because fighting blocked all roads. In the end, Bar Sauma and Markos stayed with the Patriarch in Bagdad and never reached Jerusalem. The elder monk, Bar Sauma, became Visitor-General for congregations in the East, and ambassador of the Persian Mongolian Il-Khan to the emperor of Byzantium, Andronicus II, the king of France, Philip IV, the king of England, Edward I, and Pope Nicholas IV. Markos, the younger monk, found himself consecrated a Metropolitan of China and received the Name Yahballaha. When the Patriarch died in 1281, Yahballaha was elected Patriarch of the Church of the East, becoming spiritual head of the faithful in Mesopotamia, Syria, Persia, Armenia, India, Central Asia (e.g. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) and China. The area includes the Himalaya Mountains in the South and South Siberia with Lakes Balkhash and Baykal in the North. Syriac as a literary and liturgical language was used by Christians of different ethnic origins across Eurasia, such as Persians, Turcic peoples, Sogdians, Mongols (Uighurs, Onguts, Kerait, Naiman etc.) and Chinese.

There are mainly two periods of missionary activities toward Central Asia and China. In the first period - as inscribed at the famous monument of Xi'anfu - Christianity

reached the capital of the ruling Tang dynasty in 635. That means that Central Asia with the cities Merv, Bukhara, and Samarkand had been crossed, the Turfan oasis and Dunghuan had been reached as well as Tibetan country. In the middle of the 9th century the Chinese Emperor opposed foreign religion and Christianity after a history of two hundred years disappeared with the expulsion of Christian monks. At about the same time Christianity among the Tibetans declined because of strong Buddhist reactions.

A second but more successful period is related to the Mongol peoples. Syrian monks and merchants were still on their way along the silk roads and messengers of the Christian faith. In the 11th century the Kerait south of Lake Baykal was converted. The conversion of the prince of the Mongol Kerait gave a new impetus. When Temujin, called Genghis-Khan, established his power in the 13th century, Christianity has not only spread among the Kerait, but also among other Mongol tribes, e.g. Naiman, Karakitai, Ongut, Merkit, Oirat and others.³⁶ From the beginning of the growing Mongol Empire, Christians were included and some Khans had Christian wives. Generally the Church of the East flourished under Mongol rule. In its heyday, the 13th and 14th centuries, bishoprics and metropolitan sees stretched from the Oxus to the Yellow Sea. However, in the 1368 the Mongol-Yuan dynasty was expelled by the Ming and after the long period of foreign rulers, the Turco-Mongol people and

³⁶ Cf. L. Tang, *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol- Yuan China* (Orientalia biblica et Christiana 18). Wiesbaden 2011.

anybody non-Chinese were expelled as a reaction and by that the Christian faith as well. This second decline was so complete that the Jesuits, who reached China more than two hundred years later, were regarded as the very first Christians there.

In this period also in Central Asia Buddhism in the form of Lamaism won the Turco-Mongol people and the Mongols of the IInd-Khanate in Persia started to embrace Islam. These developments were supported by the problem of communication within the Church of the East. It was a vast geographic area of about nine thousand kilometres expansion from the See of the Catholicos in Baghdad to Khanbaliq/Beijing in China. The Christian communities were usually small, scattered and not well interconnected. The Church government was complicated because Christianity included very different peoples with different languages which led to wide-ranging independence of the Metropolitans, although they were bound together by their liturgical language and their consecration by the Catholicos-Patriarch.³⁷

To these inner factors two major external factors contributed to the decline: First, the murderous plague in Innermost Asia in the 14th century, and second the devastating campaigns of the insane Muslim conqueror Timur Lenk (Tamerlane), which destroyed the Church of the East in Central Asia. It

became a small community in the Hakkari mountains of Northern Mesopotamia.

6. Some future research perspectives

While Christianity in the West is generally well studied, there are still enormous lacunae of Asian Christianity in the so-called Middle Ages, to use a Western term of periodization. The Church of the East was not the only form of Christianity along the silk roads. We know about Syrian Orthodox, Armenians, Russian Orthodox and Latin Missionaries of the Franciscan order in Central Asia and the Far East. But the Church of the East was the most successful with considerable converts also among native people. It is evident that this missionary activity covering mountains, deserts, Steppes, fertile valleys and oasis implicates also complex processes of acculturation. The International Dunghang Project³⁸ with participation of European (German, French, British), Russian, Japanese and Chinese scholars, is working to make manuscripts, paintings, textiles and artefacts from Dunhuang and archaeological sites of the Eastern Silk Road freely available on the Internet. The Christian texts are in Syriac, Soghdian (Iranian), Persian and Uighur (Turkish). An on-going project focusses on the editing of the Christian library of Turfan.³⁹ The aim is to catalogue some 900 manuscripts. The texts are dating from the 9th-12th centuries and include liturgical texts, Bible readings,

³⁷ W. Hage, "Eastern Christianity in the Central Asian Environment", in: Idem, *Syriac Christianity in the East*, 27-41.

³⁸ Cf. <http://idp.bl.uk/>

³⁹ Cf. e.g.: E.C.D. Hunter, "The Christian Library from Turfan: Syr HAT 41-42-43: An Early Exemplar of the Hudra", in: Hugoye. *Journal of Syriac Studies* 15 (20D) 301-351.

hymns and psalters, as well as ascetical texts like translations from Evagrius Ponticus, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and several East Syrian writers.⁴⁰ This might give further sources to get at least a basic idea of liturgy, prayer, life, and structure of that Christianity. But there are also other thrilling text found there, like those folios from Xaraxoto, which include Syriac and Soghdian and Uighur texts in Syriac Script, or interesting enough, a Syriac text written in Uighur.⁴¹ Just to name some examples.

As we have seen, the Church of the East positively encountered Islam at trust in the Middle East and had its most successful mission in China and Central Asia during the Tang (618-907) and Mongol-Yuan (12th -14th centuries) periods. Studies done on these periods are based on Inscriptions, Chinese documents e.g. from Dunhuang, gravestones e.g. in Kirghizstan, in northwest and southeast

China. mediaeval travelogues of western missionaries etc. What is even less known, is a wider spread of the Church of the East in furthestmost Asia such as Tibet, Western China, Ceylon and Southeast Asia. Evidences in multifarious forms such as rock inscription in Ladakh, Tibet; manuscripts from Dunhuang Grottos; Syro-Turkic epitaphs in Xinjiang. Western China and medieval travelogues on Southeast Asia, etc., have all suggested East Syriac presence in these areas prior to the arrival of Roman Catholic and Protestant missions. Studying the spread of East Syriac Christianity in Tibet, West China, Ceylon and Southeast Asia before 1500 would also give an idea of inter-religious encounters between Christians and peoples of other faiths along the Silk Road, e.g. Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism and Islam. There is still a lot to do in the field.

⁴⁰ Cf. <http://www.soas.ac.uk/ceoclurfan1>

⁴¹ Cf. P. Zieme, "Notes on a Bilingual Prayer from Bulayik, in: D.W. Winkler/L. Tang (eds), *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters. Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*. (orientalia — patristica — oecumenical vol. 1). Berlin 2009. 168-180. These and other studies combined with most recent research are presented at the Salzburg International Conferences "Research on the Church of the East in China and Central Asia". Conferences took place in 2003, 2006, 2009, 2013. So far three Volumes are published: L. Tang/D.W. Winkler (eds.), *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores. Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*. (orientalia w patristica — oecumenical vol. 5). Berlin 2013; D.W. Winkler/L. Tang (eds), *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters. Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*. (orientalia — patristica — oecumenical vol. 1). Berlin 2009; R. Malek (ed.), *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*. Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica 2006.

Early Syriac Christian Poetry: Its Contribution to Theology and its Relationship to Antiochene Exegesis from an Ecumenical Point of View

Shijo Joseph Puthenparambil

Early Syriac Christian writers made use of poetry to produce and to popularize theological views based on the Holy Scripture and the Tradition. Prominent among them are Ephrem the Syrian, Narsai of Nisibis and Jacob of Serugh. Their poetry can be understood as “hymnic biblical exegesis”. This paper studies the originality and uniqueness of Early Syriac poetical exegesis and its specific role in constituting a common tradition that makes use of poetry to teach, to preach and to praise and which is well recognizable not only in among different Churches of Syriac tradition but also other linguistic traditions of Christianity. Finally this paper aims at briefly analysing the relationship between Syriac Christian Poetry and Antiochene exegesis.

1.1 Context of Syriac Literature

The context of early Syriac Christian literary endeavour reflected greatly in the nature and forms of its making. The main factors

of the context of literary activity of early Syriac Christianity are indeed social, political, cultural and ecclesiastical. Issues such as religious persecution, political loyalty and discrimination, ecclesiastical divisions and doctrinal differences etc., which functioned to constitute the contextual basis, had been instrumental, in general, to early Syriac Christian literary behaviour. Moreover, it developed in a multilingual context which seems fundamental to assess its ecumenical relevance.

1.1.1 Multilingualism

The multilingual culture, in which most of the early Syriac literary efforts were made, seems to be significant in the late antique world. There were, indeed contacts between languages like Hebrew, Greek, Armenian, Ethiopian, Latin, and Syriac.¹ These interactions do not necessarily mean that there had been absorption of one into another. Of these Interlingua relations, predominant was

¹ For example, while describing the textual tradition of the verse homily on Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh attributed to Ephrem which comes under the ‘Ephrem Graecus Corpus’ with an extant Syriac counterpart, Brock brings our attention to the multilingual aspects of the text; See Brock, “Ephrem’s Verse Homily on Jonah”, 71 – 86.

the one between Greek and Syriac. It resulted in translations of the literary corpus of each one into the other, though apparently sizeable was the one from Greek into Syriac. Sebastian Brock notes,

As far as literature is concerned, one might suggest that this was at least in part due to the meeting of, and interaction between, two great literary cultures, Greek and Aramaic, the latter revitalized by the adoption of Syriac (the Edessene dialect of Aramaic) as the literary vehicle for Aramaic-speaking Christianity. The product of this creative activity proved to be particularly influential in two areas of Christian literature, liturgy and poetry: the Syrian, or "Antiochian" origins of the great Byzantine liturgical tradition are well known, while on the Syriac side, liturgical texts in this language reached India (where they are still in use) and even China. In the case of poetry I have in mind, as far as Greek poetry is concerned, primarily that which innovates metrically, abandoning the old classical metres for the new principles of syllabism and

homotony: here it is the great poets of Syria and Palestine, men like Romanos, Cosmas of Jerusalem, Sophronios, John of Damascus and Andrew of Crete (but originally also of Damascus), on the Greek side; Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh, Narsai on the Syriac, whose names and influence stand out in the annals of eastern Christian poetry and hymnography.²

According to Brock there was also conveyance of literary motifs without the assistance of actual translations. For example Ephrem the Syrian refers to Greek mythological episodes, though not many, in his hymns.³ Ephrem's use of Jewish Haggadic traditions, which might have reached him through an oral tradition, also provides evidences for multilingual culture in Late Antiquity.⁴ In the fifth century it was specifically apparent, when the Graeco-Syriac and even Syro-Persian translations were carried out in the school of Edessa, by which the works of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia were translated into Syriac.⁵ Later these translated exegetical works might have provided good guidance for Narsai of Nisibis.⁶ With this understanding of the multilingual background we have to study the nature and aspects of Syriac poetry.

² Brock, "From Ephrem to Romanos", 139.

³ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise III*. 8 (to Tantalus), Beck. *Carmina Nisibena* 3: 5 (to Orpheus); Cf. Brock, "From Ephrem to Romanos", 144.

⁴ Brock, "From Ephrem to Romanos", 144.

⁵ Cf. Vööbus, *History of the School*, 16–20.

⁶ Martin, "Homélie de Narsès", 475.

1.2 Nature of Syriac Poetry

Syriac literature had its own place and wide-reaching esteem in the ancient world. Doubtlessly, we realize that the prime position of the Syriac literary corpus was decorated by the forms of poetry. According to Brock the reputation of Syriac poetry was at its heights in the fourth and fifth centuries. With reference to the disregard suffered by Syriac language and Syriac literature he observes as follows:

References to 'barbaric Syriac' in Greek writers should not mislead one into thinking that literature in Syriac was undeveloped or uncouth. On the contrary it was a literary language which could boast writers of wide fame, men like Bardaisan (died 222) and the poet Ephrem (d.373). Nor was the movement of translation in a single direction, from Greek to Syriac; especially in the fourth and fifth centuries, it seems, a number of works by Syriac authors were translated into Greek, and we learn from a fragment by Theodore of

Mopsuestia that Flavian bishop of Antioch and Diodore bishop of Tarsus had Syriac antiphonal liturgical poetry translated into Greek.⁷

The degradation caused by this literary brilliance from "barbary", made the Hellenistic chauvinism to assert that Syriac verse structure originated from Greek.⁸ But the evidence from early pagan literature itself proves the independent development of Syriac poetry. So having a profound lineage, either pagan or Christian, the exclusive nature of Syriac Literature, especially Syriac poetry must be primarily taken into consideration. Brock brings our attention to Jerome's knowledge of Greek translations of Ephrem's works and that was notably only about twenty years after Ephrem's death in 373.⁹ Besides this, Brock excellently objects Sozomen's attempt to attribute Greek to be the language that initiated the very art of poetry into Syriac. "It was largely by means of translations of Syriac religious poetry, whether by Ephrem or not, that the Greek-speaking world was introduced to the isosyllabic poetry of the Syrian church, for many of these Greek translations preserve

⁷ Brock, "Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria", 152.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 153; Sebastian Brock cites from Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.16. Sozomen's statement is questioned by Brock and he proves with examples of earliest pieces of Syriac literature, that Sozomen's description of the origins of Syriac Poetry is baseless. See, Brock, "Syriac and Greek Hymnography", 79.

⁹ Cf. Brock, "Greek into Syriac and Syriac into Greek", 13; Medieval Greek manuscripts frequently present texts ascribed to Ephrem. But many of these lack exact translation from Syriac texts and some of these translations from Syriac are texts which do not belong to Ephrem.

the isosyllabism of the originals.”¹⁰ If so, Syriac poetry in the isosyllabic form must be viewed exceptional. Let us now look at the different forms of Syriac poetry.

1.3 Forms of Syriac Poetry

According to Anton Baumstark's classification of Syriac poetic forms we commonly find two main categories, namely, *madrasha* which are sung in stanzaic verse and *memra* which are recited and has non-stanzaic verse.¹¹ Both these common Syriac verse forms are isosyllabic and cannot be counted on the basis of length or stress.¹² Though initially the very sense of the word *madrasha* meant an attire of polemic argumentation in the form of poetry, the term was gradually used for all melodious verse compositions. Generally it contained poems with equal or diverse syllable patterns, sung by a soloist, during which a chorus responded with refrains (*onitha*, *unaya*: mostly one-line), like in responsorial psalms.¹³ *Madrasha* on the whole included a large variety of stanza patterns.¹⁴ Another form of acrostic poem called *soghyatbe* (hymns/dialogue poems/dispute poems), comes within the frames of *madrasha*,¹⁵ but much shorter, since they are usually compiled in alphabetic acrostic order.

A *memra* consists of isosyllabic couplets evidently lengthier (more than 200 lines in general)¹⁶ than a *madrasha* or a *sogitha*, and as earlier mentioned, was presumably recited. It is featured as the unique Syriac genus of verse discourse and was appropriately used for liturgical contemplations, ascetical or moral instructions, and polemical descriptions. The couplets in a *memra* entailed any of the 5+5, 6+6, 7+7, 12+12 syllables. Though we are little informed about the beginnings of this poetical genre, the legendary “Hymn of the Soul (Hymn of the Pearl)”, kept in *The Acts of Thomas* is perhaps older than *The Acts* themselves and remains as one of the earliest extant examples of Syriac poetry (6+6 syllables) in *memra* form.¹⁷ Robert Murray's remarks on the “semi-poetical” treatment to which Aphrahat slides perhaps open a way to the understanding of the development of *memra* form in Syriac literature. “Aphrahat readily slips into a strongly rhythmical style with parallel cola, but not in strict metre and in a manner that sometimes reminds us most of Hebrew wisdom literature.”¹⁸

We find still other names of poetical forms which may come within the category of *madrasha* while observing the progress of

¹⁰*Ibid*; Brock supports Paul Maas' theory concerning Greek kontakion by which Paul Maas describes Kontakion as a ‘lyrische predigt’ and believes that the poetic form of Kontakion was mainly inspired by Syriac *Madrasha*. See, Maas, “Das Kontakion”, 289; See also Brock, “Syriac and Greek Hymnography”, 81.

¹¹ Cf. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 37.

¹² Cf. Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies*, 9.

¹³ Cf. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 39.

¹⁴ Cf. Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies*, 9.

¹⁵ Cf. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 37.

¹⁶ Cf. Brock, “Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 33.

¹⁷ Cf. Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac studies*, 9.

¹⁸ Murray, *Symbols of Church*, 340.

Syriac literature from late antiquity to early modernity. For example, an *Anonymous Poem on Crusades* written in classical Syriac is classified as *onita* by Alessandro Mengozzi.¹⁹ This hymn's characteristics such as "22 pairs of four-line stanzas, forming an alphabetic acrostic, seven syllable lines and the flamboyant rhythm of narration with a prologue and an epilogue"²⁰ may list it within the category of *madrashe*. Along with this, the same author sorts out another form, namely a *dorektha* "On the Russian-Turkish war of 1876–1878" compiled by Stephen of Alqosh in modern Aramaic (vernacular Syriac). This poem belongs to the modern Syriac genre of *dorekyathe* and is a rather lengthy stanzaic poem, the form of which suits the requirements of an oral transmission. It has got features such as "rhythmical figures and repetition (rhyme, reduplication, the beginning of a sentence with the concluding word of the one preceding, repetition of the same word or phrase in several successive clauses, in connecting the stanzas)."²¹

A.S. Rodrigues Pereira mentions – based on Sebastian Brock's remarks regarding Syriac

dialogue poems²² – yet another sub-category. Though more or less similar to *soghyathe*, this genre shows characteristics of narrative dramatic dialogue poems, whereby more than two people are involved in the dispute and dialogues are not in alternating strophes.²³ For, as Brock points out, "among the many extant Syriac dialogue poems the *sogyathe* (*soghithe*) form a distinct group whose chief characteristic is the allocation of alternate stanzas to each speaker".²⁴

It is remarkable that "this particular form of stylized dialogue in fact has its origin in another genre, the ancient Mesopotamian precedence dispute (prose or verse)".²⁵ R. Murray also brings our attention to the concise study by Pierre Grelot, which reveals the intimate association to this sort in both Sumerian and Accadian literature, namely the *Adaman-du-ga*.²⁶ The references of the extension of this link then to Medieval Europe²⁷ from Syriac through Arabic *Munazara*,²⁸ spell out the explicit role that Syriac poetry might have played in the history of world literature.

¹⁹ Cf. Mengozzi, "Suraye wa Phrangaye", 3 – 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² Cf. Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems", 31.

²³ Cf. Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry*, 112.

²⁴ Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems", 31; Brock notes also that the term *soghithe* has a wider scope than just dialogue poems and all *soghyathe* are not alphabetical.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Cf. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Ch. 7, and Van Dijk, *La sagesse Sumero-Accadienne*, 31 – 85; J. J. A. Van Dijk makes an investigation of this literary genus in three Sumerian illustrations, the contests between summer and winter, precious metal and copper, and the shepherd and the farmer.

²⁶ Cf. Murray, *Symbols of Church*, 339; Grelot, "Un poème de S. Éphrem" 443 – 452.

²⁷ Cf. Steinscheider, *Rangstreit Literatur*, 4; Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems", 31.

²⁸ Cf. Wagner, *Die arabische Rangstreitdichtung*, nr. 8; Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems", 31.

1.4 Purpose of Poetical Activity

Poetical activity had many functions. It was used as an easy vehicle of communicating in different spheres of society, either religious or secular, to teach or to defend, to pray or to entertain, to meditate or to dispute. Though our discussion rotates around Syriac poetry as a whole, once we approach the life of early Syriac Christianity, we observe how greatly early Syriac Christian poetry, if viewed as a compartment, has contributed to the whole Christian literature. Simultaneously, it becomes obvious how influential poetry was over the entire life, particularly, of East Syriac Christianity or the Persian sector of Syriac Christianity.

1.4.1 Religious Purpose of Syriac Poetry

Early Syriac Christianity saw pastoral and liturgical use of poetry. It was not merely a literary exercise of language; instead it was the language of the heart for people at the time. It was the linguistic medium of their scriptural study. It was the verbal mode of their daily prayer. Ephrem's influence in this concern is undisputable.²⁹ "The East Syriac liturgy known as the *Hudra*, is traditionally ascribed to Ephrem. Although the material is drawn from variety of sources and authors, the stamp of Ephrem is indelible".³⁰ Poetical

writing was an easier method to let the faithful learn the liturgical texts by heart.³¹ It also helped to make the oral transmission of such musical texts possible. The style of repetition in poetry points to the technical attempts to make memorizing of the poems easier. For, in the early Syriac Church the liturgy is compared to the prayer of the heart³² and learning the liturgical texts by heart was presupposed. Poetry was the easiest means to teach liturgical texts and to make them recall during prayer hours in a period when there were no printing or other communication facilities. Adam H. Becker writes about the activity of the School of Nisibis as follows:

Members of the School produced a large corpus of liturgical works, and it is appropriate considering what seems to be the East-Syrian schools' focus on vigils and group prayer. These works, some of which are extant, serve a variety of functions and include prayers of thanksgiving, hymns of praise, responses, stanzaic poems and diverse forms of supplication.³³

1.4.2 Didactic Purpose of Syriac Poetry

Within the liturgical and monastic setting of Syriac heritage, poetry had an instructional purpose too. As carriers of biblical commentary the *memre* and *madrashé* of

²⁹ See Brock, "Some Early Witnesses", 9 – 45; See also Brock, "The Transmission of Ephrem's Madrashe"; 490 – 505.

³⁰ Buck, *Paradise and Paradigm*, 314.

³¹ Cf. Morrison, "The Bible in the Hands of Aphrahat", 11; Aphrahat is said to have had larger sections of Biblical parts in memory.

³² Cf. Brock, "The Spirituality of the Heart", 93 – 105.

³³ Becker, *Fear of God*, 90 – 91.

Ephrem were used for instruction.³⁴ The themes of Ephrem's most important hymns such as *On Faith*, *Nisibene Hymns*, *Against Heresies*, *On the Church*, *On the Nativity*, *On unleavened Bread*, *On the Crucifixion and on Resurrection*, *On Paradise*, and *On the Fast* prove that they were written with instructional motive.³⁵ Even the translation of the word *madrashe* which is commonly translated as "hymns" is incorrect, according to some scholars, and they substitute it with "teaching songs". Accordingly, they are not mainly songs of praise. The modification of the meaning in such a way also points to the didactic relevance of *madrashe*. Another example of the instructional purpose of poetry would be located in *The Book of Steps*, which is also known as *Syriac Liber Graduum*. The anonymous author of this compilation of homilies or discourses gives instructions about different stages of spiritual life.³⁶ The *Aphrahat Demonstrations* with their semi-poetical features are also understood as best examples of educating the faithful to a better Christian life. In the view of the writer of *Aphrahat Demonstrations*, there is always a motive of learning and teaching for a reader of the Sacred Scripture.³⁷

1.5 Stylistic nature of Syriac Poetry

Even before poetry as such was not commonly used among Syriac Christian communities some specific qualities of poetry could be discovered in Syriac Christian prose. Examples are *Aphrahat's Demonstrations*. "Even though the *Demonstrations* are in prose, the prose often has poetic characteristics. Aphrahat excels in following Semitic rhetorical tradition, i.e., the use of parallelism, rhythmic and syllabic patterns, paradigmatic catenae, chiasmus, thesis, antithesis etc".³⁸ As this style comes to Ephrem, a genuine form of poetry is made which shows its unique character. Murray notes, "Ephrem's use of Memra reduces the more 'hebraic' verse-patterns of Aphrahat to a fixed syllabic count..."³⁹ Thus the stylistic nature of Syriac poetry is immensely visible in Ephrem. Let us look at Ephrem's connection and contributions to Syriac poetry.

1.6 Ephrem's Poetry

In the Syriac tradition of Christianity Ephrem's top position as a poet is indisputable.⁴⁰ The esteem enjoyed by the Syriac language in the literary world is generally accepted as created primarily by Ephrem's

³⁴ Cf. Griffith, "Syriac/Antiochene Exegesis in Saint Ephrem", 29.

³⁵ Cf. Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 20.

³⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁷ Cf. Valavanolickal, *Aphrahat Demonstrations* I, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 3; See also Maude, "Rhythmic Patterns" 225 – 233; Murray, "Some Rhetorical Patterns", 109 – 131.

³⁹ Murray, *Symbols*, 31.

⁴⁰ Cf. Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum*, 49.

works, which allows him to be hailed as poet-theologian⁴¹ by different streams of thinking. The initial stage of Syriac literary tradition witnessed his graceful presence and was enriched by his valuable contributions especially in the field of poetry. As Sebastian Brock observes, "Syriac literature has produced a very large number of poets, but one in particular among them towers in stature as a poet of real originality and spiritual insight, Ephrem of Nisibis, who died in 373 at Edessa; his *madrashe*, or hymns can justly take a place among the religious poetry of the world"⁴² Majority of his writings are composed of *madrashe*. Verse homilies or *memre* are less in number compared to *madrashe*. Robert Murray personally evaluates Ephrem as "true ancestor of Romanos and therefore of Byzantine *Kontakion*, and as the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet beside Dante."⁴³ So we have to approach Ephrem's poetry from an ecumenical point of view, which necessitates us to state that Syriac poetry guided even other ecclesiastical traditions to approach theology in a different manner.

1.6.1 Ephrem's Poetry as a Religious Language

The human attempt to define divine

reality finds its ways in human language. Frances M. Young brings Gregory of Nyssa's view on Religious language to our attention. It guides us to see the relevance of Ephrem's poetry as the best medium to grasp the incomprehensible reality. According to Gregory of Nyssa, created human speech develops into human language in its different forms. God entrusted to man the invention and development of linguistic expressions. Compared to human language, religious language is understood as something that in what human beings perceive God's operations.⁴⁴ For Ephrem, in such perception, created things provide symbols or images of the Creator. It is through the created world that "the invisible is seen, the unknowable known".⁴⁵

According to Gregory of Nyssa, certain names received through the meditation of divine actions and assured by the created world and by the Scripture, convey sufficiently, though restrictedly, the transcendental reality.⁴⁶ In his refusal of Arianism Ephrem frequently makes use of names which denote divine reality. He is certain about the role names play to reveal the truth of God.⁴⁷ Ephrem considers that the vocabulary of human language can be

⁴¹ Sebastian Brock provides a good detail of Ephrem's position as a poet-theologian. See Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 23 – 24.

⁴² Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies*, 8.

⁴³ Murray, *Symbols of Church*, 31. At the same time he thinks that the extensive *Ephrem Graecus* corpus which makes Ephrem famous in the west cannot be possibly related to him.

⁴⁴ Cf. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 140 – 141.

⁴⁵ Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 22.

⁴⁶ Cf. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 142 – 143.

⁴⁷ Cf. Molenberg, "An invincible Weapon", 135.

reasonably applied of God, "not univocally but analogically".⁴⁸ For, these epithets "have been used in God's own work of revelation."⁴⁹ So, for Ephrem it is necessary to use this language, though it seems inadequate. It is difficult to be conceived as the terminology of any philosophical language.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the language by which Ephrem pictures divine revelation is symbolic and poetic.⁵¹ It is the language of poetry. Northrop Frye's analysis of linguistic phases identifies a metaphoric phase of language, where poetry is utterance, language has power, the name is presence, and the word suggests the thing.⁵² For Ephrem poetry is the language which makes use of metaphors, but goes beyond metaphorical level. Poetry is the best medium to learn and to teach transcendental themes. It ascends normal rules of language and usually accepted forms of structure of sentences. Each expression in a poetical piece offers a possibility for profound meditation; let it be either made out of a few words or a bundle of words. One of the important characteristics of Syriac poetry from the time of

Ephrem is its allusive lyricism⁵³ conveyed through expressions of incomprehensibility filled with wonder and paradox. Thus through his poetical language he converts the human language into a religious language; he leaves his own imprint of creativity which goes beyond the levels of normal human language, perhaps uneasy for normal language to get hold of it and to appreciate it.⁵⁴ He could even go beyond Greek writers of his time with his language of poetry. The appraisal of Sozomen in his *Ecclesiastical History* as follows, underlines the high esteem Ephrem enjoyed in the early period for his wonderful skill of employing poetical language:

[Ephrem was] so proficient in the learning and language of Syrians and comprehended with ease most complex theorems of philosophy. His style was stuffed with splendid oratory and with richness and temperateness of thought he surpassed the most approved writers of Greek.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Murray, "Theory of Symbolism", 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ephrem's thought in this concern is similar to Gregory of Nyssa. But Murray affirms that Ephrem's language does not reflect "Platonic philosophy" like Gregory. Ephrem is capable to sustain his preferred language rich in symbols and analogically valid. Cf. Murray, "Theory of Symbolism", 13; But according to Ute Possekkel, Ephrem is informed of philosophical issues in general and in his *Treatise against Mani*, Ephrem refers to Plato and rejects Manichaeism claims of possessing Platonic tradition of learning and teaching. Cf. Possekkel, *Evidence*, 54.

⁵¹ Cf. Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 22.

⁵² Cf. Frye, *The Great Code*; Cf. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 144.

⁵³ Cf. Brock, *An introduction to Syriac Studies*, 8.

⁵⁴ Cf. Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, 96 – 109. While analysing 13th of Ephrem's Nisibene hymns inscribed *On St. Jacob and His Companions* Burkitt evaluates the poet's extraordinary style of repetition and allusiveness as if uncommon and lacking depth.

⁵⁵ Quoted from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian Hymns*, 13.

1.6.2 Ephrem's Poetry: Theology beyond Definitions

According to the general understanding, in poetry each expression functions as a symbol offering the reader or hearer an inexplicable experience. Poetry reveals in every reading something new and hides something; keeps something to be explored. It is away from systematization of the themes it deals with. Brock clearly comments about it,

Although Saint Ephrem has a very coherent and well thought out theological vision, he does not ever express this vision in any systematic form...his approach dislikes any kind of systematization, and is essentially dynamic and fluid in character.⁵⁶

So, it seems right to state that, to avoid the possibility of risks caused by systematization of theologizing Ephrem opts for a language that is dynamic, paradoxical, and poetic. This way of expression purposely avoids "the setting of boundaries and definitions".⁵⁷ Poetry does not give precise definitions⁵⁸ of the subjects dealt with, rather expresses the feeling of the poet who experiences the truth. Along with him he makes the hearers or readers feel by means of symbols and figures of speech, as it is

considered specific to rhetoric. It attracts the hearer or reader with its beats of melody. Murray notes,

Ephrem himself at his best is a master of symbolism as well as of rhetorical figures and the music of words. Where we can compare his treatment of a theme with that of other writers – or with his own prose writings – we see his power to transmute a traditional image in a way, all his own. Consequently, with all reserves due to our limited knowledge, we may judge him to be a major creative poet of an originality which he does not show, for example, in the prose commentaries on Genesis and Exodus.⁵⁹

The striking quality of Ephrem's poetry is this originality. It helped him to provide inspiring instructions and edifying discussions to his hearers, to intone laments touchingly, and to call for radical repentance through his unrivalled writings, in which he pursued the events of his time poetically.⁶⁰ The space provided by poetry to maintain this originality might have persuaded Ephrem to prefer it as a medium of theologizing.

⁵⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 21.

⁵⁷ Buchan, "Blessed is He", 343.

⁵⁸ Brock analyses that "To Ephrem, theological definitions are not only potentially dangerous, but they can also be blasphemous." Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 23.

⁵⁹ Murray, *Symbols of Church*, 340.

⁶⁰ Cf. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 39.

1.6.3 Ephrem's Preference for Poetry

Ephrem's works appears both in poetry and in prose. Sebastian Brock classifies Ephrem's works into four categories; 1. Prose works: polemical works and prose commentaries on biblical books, 2. Artistic or rhythmic prose, 3. Verse hymns (*madrashe*) and 4. Verse homilies (*memre*). Of these, the rhythmic prose cannot be completely counted as prose; rather it would be half way to poetry. Besides, the hymns (*madrashe*) make use of over fifty diverse syllabic patterns.⁶¹ These stanza patterns include a variety from the very simple to the extremely complex.⁶² According to Brock, "It is in these hymns that some of his most profound spiritual insights are to be found".⁶³ Here we are able to trace a predominance of his poetry. Through poetry he proved that it is possible to find God's revelation both in natural world and Scripture.⁶⁴ Such a priority ascribed to poetry elevates its rank among different modes of Syriac theological expression.

In this way it was different from the Greek heritage, which sought the assistance of philosophy in search of theological explanations. According to Brock, "Ephrem's radically different approach is by way of paradox and symbolism, and for this purpose poetry proves a far more suitable vehicle than

prose..."⁶⁵ Besides, while his prose commentaries deal directly with Scripture and aim at scriptural study, poetry covers a wider area including biblical interpretation.⁶⁶ All of the writings of Ephrem are, in a way, scriptural commentaries. So, by no means these are excluded from the field of Patristic Research. But the issue of viewing poetry as an instrument of exegesis makes it necessary to analyse the exercise of poetry in the interpretation of the Scripture.

1.6.4 Poetry and Exegesis - Ephrem's Poetry as Exegesis

Biblical literature which is incessantly subject to exegetical analysis has unquestionably influenced Ephrem. It may not be an exaggeration to say that his exegetical talent reflected in his poetry in its maximum originality. Ephrem made use of the linguistic tool of poetry to define, to explain and to defend doctrines of Christian faith. But, it is generally regarded as strange to consider exegesis executed through the medium of poetry. According to Brock,

Ephrem's method of scriptural exegesis will have no appeal to the modern biblical scholar, whose primary concern is with historical truth; this is because Ephrem is interested in

⁶¹ Cf. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 18.

⁶² Cf. Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies*, 9.

⁶³ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 18.

⁶⁴ Cf. Beck, *Ephrem: Paschahymnen*; (de Azymis), IV: 22 – 24.

⁶⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 24.

⁶⁶ Cf. Griffith, "Syriac/Antiochene Exegesis in Saint Ephrem", 29.

a very different mode of understanding, where the object of enquiry is not historical truth but spiritual reality - a different sort of truth, possessing a different mode of objectivity.⁶⁷

Though these realms of history and spirituality are equally justifiable, Ephrem's method of reading scripture emphasises the enquiry of spiritual reality, namely, "truth".⁶⁸ Frances M. Young sees this similar to "prying into God's nature" and she recognizes Ephrem's perception that "self-revelation of the hidden One" has made the knowledge of God feasible.⁶⁹ This divine self-revelation occurs chiefly through incarnation. But at the same time it happens by means of types and symbols perceivable not only in the Scripture but also in nature.⁷⁰ Ephrem himself depicts it poetically:

Look and see how Nature and
Scripture
are yoked together for the
Husbandman:
Nature detest adulterers,
practitioners of magic and murder;
Scripture detests them too.
Once Nature and Scripture had
cleared the Land,

they sowed in it new commandments,
in the land of the heart, so that it
might bear fruit,
praise for the Lord of Nature
glory for the Lord of Scripture.⁷¹

Thus Ephrem seeks the assistance of poetry to express his symbolic world view by which he tries to grasp divine self-revelation. The symbolic interpretation of the Bible is part of this expression. It is the symbolic structure of the Bible that initiates such an interpretation.⁷² So the role of poetry here is to make use of this symbolic structure for exegesis. It proves that Ephrem's poetical exegesis is capable of drawing on natural and biblical symbols for the perception of divine reality. Scripture provides the rule of faith for this perception and the creation verifies it. In this concern Ephrem looks upon the Bible as a whole.⁷³ In Ephrem's own words;

Like the body of the alphabet,
which is complete in its members,
neither subtracting a letter, nor
adding an extra one,
so is the Truth which is written in
the Holy Gospel, in the letters of
the alphabet, the perfect measure
which does not accept less or
more.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 161.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Cf. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 145 – 146.

⁷⁰ Cf. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 146.

⁷¹ Beck, *Ephrem: Hymnen contra Häreses*, XXVIII.11; quoted from Griffith, "Syriac/Antiochene Exegesis in Saint Ephrem", 31.

⁷² Cf. Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 29.

⁷³ Cf. Griffith, "Ephraem the Exegete", 1410.

⁷⁴ Beck, *Ephrem: Hymnen contra Häreses*, XXII: 1; quoted from Griffith, "Ephraem the Exegete", 1411.

This comprehensive approach helps Ephrem to view the Bible itself as an interpreter. Murray notes:

For Ephrem biblical types do not stand on their own as special isolated mode of revelation. He never treats the biblical text as a world on its own: rather the Bible, as a work of God in human imagery and language, is a part, as well as a special interpreter, of the whole world and its history.⁷⁵

Thus with his poetical exegesis Ephrem converses an explicit view about the role of the Scripture as a whole in the process of divine revelation that focuses on Christ and on divine economy. This approach to exegesis has got a connection to the Antiochene principles of exegesis and that attracts our attention, because of its relevance for ecumenical theology.

1.6.5 Ephrem and Antiochene Exegesis

Scholars view basic behaviour of Antiochene Exegesis in the works of Ephrem. He is characterised as a representative of the Antiochene School. According to R. Murray,

Ephrem's literary achievements lie in prose (scripture commentaries and controversial treatises) and in genres of metrical homily (*memra*) and doctrinal hymn (*madrasha*)... His dates make him the father of Syriac Exegesis; in relation to the Antiochenes (who all wrote in Greek), he was slightly younger than Eusebius of Emesa, and slightly older than Diodore, the teacher of John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Ephrem, and especially East Syriac exegetes after him, have been classified as Antiochene in method.⁷⁶

Murray views Ephrem's exegesis as performing a method, which makes use of principles developed from the larger framework of his symbolic theology inclusive of legitimate philosophic principles. One of the basic forces of Syriac Exegesis is its stand against artificial allegorizing of biblical text. Murray continues, "They [Syrian exegetes] are, indeed, similar in insisting on the abiding value of the natural sense of an Old Testament passage and what it meant its own time and context, and in rejecting artificial allegorical interpretation".⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Murray, "Theory of Symbolism", 5.

⁷⁶ Murray cites from Hidal, "Exegesis of the Old Testament" 543 – 568; See Murray, *Symbols of Church*, 31.

⁷⁷ Murray, *Symbols of Church*, 31.

1.6.5.1 Historical and Spiritual Exegesis of Ephrem

The Antiochene emphasis of *historia* and *theōria*, is evident in Ephrem's concept of Scriptural interpretation. Sebastian Brock considers it as follows.

Scripture may be said to possess both an exterior and an interior meaning; the exterior belongs to the sphere of what we could call historical reality, the interior to that of spiritual reality: both coexist, just as the humanity and divinity do in the incarnate Christ. The parallelism which Ephrem sees between God's two incarnations, first into human language when 'He put on names' in Scripture, and then the Incarnation proper, throws important light on his understanding of Scripture and the need he sees for the presence of faith in its interpretation... Where there is no inner eye of faith, all that is visible is the exterior, historical, meaning of Scripture – what the fathers generally call 'the letter'.... But for Ephrem this perspective is not enough since it only concerns historical reality; just as only the eye of faith can move from the historical person of

Jesus to the incarnate Christ, so too with Scripture only the eye of faith can penetrate inward to discover something of the interior meaning, of spiritual reality.⁷⁸

So, though it is clear that Ephrem shows concern mostly for penetrating into the interior meaning of the Scripture, we cannot think that he supports a "meaning beyond" the Scripture. He is convinced of the literal or historical meaning of the Scripture and its importance, though traditionally he is understood as supporting individual freedom in interpretation.

Nabil el Khoury points out the distinction made by Ephrem in his commentary on Genesis between interpreting allegorically and interpreting literally.⁷⁹ Ephrem writes;

Let no man think that the work of six days is an allegory; nor it is possible to say that in one moment took place what in reality took days to accomplish, nor that these are simply empty names or that something else is meant by these terms. On the contrary let us be sure that, in truth, heaven and earth are as they were created in the beginning and that nothing else but Heaven and earth is meant by their names.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 46 – 47.

⁷⁹ Khoury, "Hermeneutics of Ephraim the Syrian", 95 – 96.

⁸⁰ Tonneau, *Ephrem, Commentary on Genesis*, 8; 18 – 27.

Murray sees even a “most splendid appearance of Antiochene exegesis” in Ephrem’s exegesis, which is all at once a mission of his symbolical cosmic vision.⁸¹

1.6.5.2 Typology of Ephrem

Through scriptural exegesis Ephrem symbolically communicate his cosmic view. In this attempt he is concerned about both the literal meaning and spiritual meaning of the Scripture. He makes use of symbols and types in his exegesis. Ephrem’s perspective of types and symbols, which is named either as “typology” or as “symbolic theology” is sometimes viewed as “a less developed allegorism”.⁸² But Murray compares it to Antiochene *theōria*. Murray considers the Antiochene *theōria* as an occasional extension of Ephrem’s “typology”. He remarks, “beyond the Antiochene *theōria* (an occasional extension of typology which contemplates God’s action in both Testaments together), Ephrem’s exegesis can soar to heights of poetic imagination no less than in his hymns; indeed his feel for symbolism integrates his biblical interpretation within a wider, even cosmic, spiritual vision of divine revelation.”⁸³ And above all in his scriptural exegesis Ephrem seems to hold on to scriptural typology. As far as his Christological narrations are concerned, it seems that he does not go beyond scripture. Of course, poetically he

makes use of the symbols from nature to explain how the whole created world is related to the Creator in faith and love. For, it is possible for him to explain about a loving, merciful, descending and revealing God, who is a reality, graspable with the tools of normal theological suppositions. For that he adopts all measures those help him to make his position clear. While speaking about the descent of God into human language, the main concern of Ephrem’s theology, it would be conceived as a matter of double incarnation: “an incarnation into human languages through types, symbols and names as well as an incarnation in Jesus”.⁸⁴ In this sense the incarnation of Jesus, the culmination of Divine condescension and His love assimilates as an ocean all rivers of symbols and types.⁸⁵ Ephrem’s comment on the climax of God’s love at the death of Jesus on the cross may be taken as an example for his Christological narration which concentrates on scriptural typology and is very close to Antiochene *theōria*. Here he amplifies the inner spiritual meaning of the offer of Abraham. Ephrem says:

Abraham had many servants,
Why did (God) not command
him to offer up one of these? It
was because (Abraham’s) love
would not have been revealed by

⁸¹ Murray, *Der Dichter als Exeget*, 486.

⁸² Muto, “Early Syriac Hermeneutics”, 43.

⁸³ Murray, *Symbols of Church*, 31.

⁸⁴ Koonammakkal, “Divine Love and Revelation”, 33.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

a servant. His son, therefore, was necessary so that Abraham's love might be revealed (Gen 22:1 – 8). There were likewise (other) servants of God, but He did not show His love towards his creatures through any of these, but rather through His Son, through whom His love for us might be proclaimed.⁸⁶

1.7 Conclusion

In this respect, we come to notice that the Early Syriac poetic approach to Scripture headed by Ephrem, goes together with Antiochene exegetical heritage and a clear cut separation of these exegetical genres seems deficient. So a re-consideration of the traditional understanding of Antiochene exegesis is necessarily which demands a re-naming of the method itself. Such a re-definition is also fundamental further in constructing a common theological platform.

⁸⁶ McCarthy, *Ephrem's Commentary*, 320.

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NEWS

Extra Ordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy Came to a Close

Concluding the extra ordinary Jubilee year of Mercy, the Holy Father Pope Francis signed his new Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera* (Mercy with Misery), addressed to the entire Catholic Church. The Pope sincerely wishes that the divine mercy may continue to be experienced throughout the lives of the faithful. The document begins with a narration of the encounter between Jesus and the adulterous woman, which was “not an encounter of sin and judgment in the abstract but of a sinner and her Saviour.”

Mar Mathew Vattackuzhy, the Second Bishop of Kanjirappally, Passed Away

Mar Mathew Vattackuzhy, Bishop emeritus of the eparchy of Kanjirappally, passed away on 22 November 2016. He studied Philosophy and Theology in Papal Seminary Pune. He was ordained priest on 01 June 1956 and was consecrated as the Bishop of Kanjirappally on 26 February 1986. Since 19 January 2001, he had been leading a retired life. He was a genuine shepherd of the people of God, who really had the smell of the sheep.

Motu Proprio De Concordia Inter Codices

The supreme Pontiff Pope Francis issued an Apostolic letter *Motu Proprio, De Concordia Inter Codices*, modifying certain canons of the Latin and the Eastern Codes of Canon Laws. This modification is specially concerned with the uniformity of celebration in Baptism and Marriage.

Theme Announced for 2018 Ordinary Synod of Bishops

Pope Francis has chosen the theme for the 15th General Assembly of the Ordinary Synod of Bishops, scheduled for October 2018. The theme chosen is ‘Young People, the Faith and Discernment of Vocation.’ The theme is chosen in consultation with the Episcopal

Conferences, the Eastern Catholic Churches *Sui iuris* and the union of Superiors General and having listened to the recommendations of the previous Synodal Fathers.

Common Commemoration of the Reformation in Sweden

A common celebration of the Catholics and the Lutherans to commemorate the fifth centenary of reformation event was conducted in Lund in Sweden on 31 October 2016. The heads of both the communities signed a common document and asked for the prayer of the faithful to make it a new step of fraternity towards full communion.

Rev. Sr Mary Litty Passed Away

Rev. Sr Mary Litty, the foundress of the Little Servants of the Divine Providence (LSDP), a religious Congregation founded in Kerala, India, breathed her last on Saturday, 05 November 2016, at the Divine Providence Convent in Kunnanthanam. She was 81 years old. She dedicated her entire life for the uplift of the disabled, the poor and the underprivileged in the society.

OIRSI Publications

Recent Books

396. **Johnson Vadakkumcherry, ed.,** *One Body One Spirit: an Ecumenical Concern*, Kottayam, 2015.
 397. **Michael Naickamparampil,** *The Biblical Basis of Consecrated Life* (English), Kottayam, 2015.
 398. **James Puliurumpil,** *Arnose Pathiri: A Pioneer Indologist*, 2015.
 399. **Michael Naickamparampil,** *Consecrated Life In The Bible* (Malayalam), Kottayam, 2015.
 400. **Andrews Mekkattukunnel, ed.,** അങ്ങേയ്ക്കു സ്തുതി, കോട്ടയം, 2015
 401. **Thomas Srampickal & Joji Chirayil, Scaria Kanniyakonil ed.,** നീതിയും സത്യസന്ധതയും, കോട്ടയം, 2015
 402. **Andrews Mekkattukunnel,** ബൈബിൾ വ്യാഖ്യാനം തിരുസഭയിൽ, Kottayam, 2015.
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